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Improving the effectiveness of the methods of work of the First Committee

Improving the effectiveness of the methods of work of the First Committee

Report of the Secretary-General

Addendum**

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* A/59/150.
** This information was received after submission of the main report.

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II. Replies received from States

J. Bulgaria

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[2 July 2004]

1. We believe that the issue of reforming the working methods and practices of the First Committee should be addressed in the overall context of the revitalization of the General Assembly. General Assembly resolution 58/126 of 19 December 2003 provides a good framework and specific measures for the renewed efforts of the international community to enhance the authority and role of the Assembly and to improve its Main Committees' working methods. Against this background, the reorganization and modernization of the First Committee should be aimed at achieving greater efficiency and pragmatism as well as better focusing of its important activities.

2. Bulgaria co-sponsored resolution 58/41, entitled "Improving the effectiveness of the methods of work in the First Committee". We fully concur with and entirely share the views expressed in the European Union non-paper on the rationalization of the work of the First Committee. We very much appreciate the proposals put forward by the Chairman of the Committee as well as by several delegations during the informal consultations in the First Committee and in the follow-up discussions. The present reply is intended to make additional comments and to elaborate, from our national perspective, on the approaches and practical steps that have already been suggested.

3. We are convinced that the working methods of this as well as of other disarmament forums should be rationalized in a way to address properly the new security threats to international peace at the beginning of the new millennium. The agenda should better reflect the present global challenges and at the same time should maintain balance in meeting the long-standing objectives and goals of the international community in the field of disarmament and non-proliferation. It is our view that all changes are to be made in a constructive and consistent manner, ensuring reinforcement and strengthening of the principles and objectives of the major multilateral instruments in this area.

4. We do not expect an easy solution to the problems experienced by the First Committee which are basically of a political nature. A favourable political environment, mutual trust and spirit of cooperation remain indispensable tools in pursuing common approaches to sensitive issues. At the same time, reorganizing the work of the Committee along the current priorities will help us to establish an infrastructure relevant to the dynamic political and security changes which can only further our goals in promoting international peace and stability.

5. Bulgaria believes that the following concrete measures could contribute to improve the working methods and practices of the First Committee:

- A shorter session of the First Committee would be possible if the Committee were able to decide on a reduced and consolidated agenda as well as on practical steps to optimize its overall organization of work. We believe that the concept of reorganization should take into account the interests and resources of small and middle-sized delegations and their wish to make full use of the

debate and participate in as many meetings as they deem appropriate. With regard to all segments of the Committee's work, a balanced approach should be pursued with a view to achieving rationalization without hampering the possibilities of all to benefit from and contribute to the discussion.

- The general debate can be shortened to one week (10 sessions or less), with an established speaking time limit of 5 minutes per individual delegation, with a possible extension of up to 10 minutes in exceptional cases. It seems that this time limit may prove sufficient for a delegation to present its views in a concise and, at the same time, adequate manner and, if it so wishes, to distribute a longer version of its statement. There could be a time limit for coalitions and subregional groupings, set at 20 minutes.

- We do not object to the idea of having interactive discussions following the general debate for two to three days on specific topics, including panel presentations by leading disarmament experts and academic think tanks. At the beginning of each session, one or two topics of priority in the field of disarmament and non-proliferation can be proposed for in-depth consideration.

- The thematic debate should remain unchanged in terms of duration. As to organization, we should be able to allocate more time to a profound discussion of key resolutions through biennialization and triennialization or by turning into decisions those resolutions that do not contain new substantive elements or where there are no developments in the specific items under which they have been introduced. We could build upon the experience of the First Committee during the fifty-eighth session of the General Assembly, during which a good example was set by several delegations on how we could handle this issue for the sake of efficiency and rationalization.

- As to the final part of the Committee's work, we see some merits and convenience in the proposal that Member States explain their positions in consolidated statements while the Committee is taking action on all draft resolutions. However, there are still important arguments for maintaining the existing practice. The explanation of vote before and after the vote as well as statements prior to action on the respective thematic cluster seem to have a distinctive place and function and represent the variety of tactical options available to Member States for outlining their positions during this key segment of our work.

K. Israel

[Original: English]
[6 July 2004]

1. The international effort to reduce and eliminate strategic threats to international and regional peace and security, such as the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and terrorism, has faced significant new and grave challenges this year.

2. Improving the effectiveness of the methods of work of the First Committee should provide the General Assembly with better means to address these challenges.

3. The First Committee would be more effective if the number of yearly resolutions were reduced significantly. We would prefer to "ease the burden" on the First Committee's agenda by avoiding the introduction of consensus resolutions on a yearly basis.

4. Israel also believes that the First Committee could best serve its objectives if the time were used for substantive discussions on the items high on the international security agenda. Therefore, we would support the idea of removing anachronistic resolutions that might have been suitable in their era but that today do not contribute to international security.

5. We welcome efforts by States to refresh and update the agenda of the First Committee in order to enhance its efficiency.

L. Canada

[Original: English]
[13 July 2004]

1. As a strong supporter of resolution 58/41, Canada welcomes this opportunity to provide views on practical measures to improve the effectiveness of the First Committee. It is our expectation that at least some of the results of this exercise can be put into practice as early as the fifty-ninth session of the General Assembly, particularly as this effort is entirely in line with broader Assembly directives delineated in resolution 58/316, entitled "Further measures for the revitalization of the work of the General Assembly", adopted by consensus on 1 July 2004.

2. In our view, the capacity of the First Committee to fulfil its primary role — namely, the universal forum for policy discussions across the range of non-proliferation, arms control and disarmament — would be significantly enhanced by a shift in emphasis towards policy and thematic debate. In this regard, we welcome the proposals made in his non-paper by the Chairman of the First Committee during the fifty-eighth session of the General Assembly. More specifically, we support a condensed, consolidated general debate, of one week's duration, with the Committee meeting both in the morning as well as the afternoon, and hope that a suitable staggering arrangement can be reached with the Fourth Committee to facilitate such a change. We would encourage the delivery of relatively concise oral statements, alongside the circulation of comprehensive written texts, with a view to improving coherence and facilitating more focused interaction.

3. We also strongly support the original proposal of the Chairman of the First Committee during the fifty-eighth session for the inclusion of an expert panel segment on a key First Committee issue immediately following the general debate. In this connection, we are pleased to note that the General Assembly, in paragraph 3 (c) of the annex to its resolution 58/316, decided that the practice of interactive debates and panel discussions shall be utilized or expanded, as appropriate, by all Main Committees so as to enhance informal, in-depth discussions and to bring together experts from various fields. In fulfilment of this obligation, the incoming Chairman and Bureau of the First Committee during the fifty-ninth session should undertake early consultations, both to propose topical issues of broad interest where the involvement of civil society and other experts could benefit the Committee's work, as well as to initiate organizational planning.

4. For Canada, the thematic portion of the session should be recognized as the focal point of the First Committee's activity. Its current organization, based on the 10 thematic clusters or topics, is for the most part conducive to focused debate. However, we would support a consolidation or reordering of the clusters, an issue which may be worthy of more formal discussion at the fifty-ninth session.

5. Furthermore, in our view, this segment of the Committee's work should be broadened to include issues and practices beyond the customary introduction of resolutions before the Committee. To this end, interactive debate should be encouraged, with "question time" as one useful option in this regard. Delegations should also be encouraged to fully capitalize on the invaluable opportunities afforded by this universal forum, by raising issues and policy concerns of particular importance to them, explaining their views, putting forward new and concrete ideas and offering practical proposals.

6. To facilitate more focused debate further, the Chairman and secretariat should organize the speakers' list coherently, so that the introduction of resolutions and statements on thematic issues are not jumbled together, as was the case during the fifty-eighth session. Instead, those wishing to speak to a thematic issue should be grouped together in advance, with a view to fostering a more coherent discussion. A rolling speakers' list should similarly become a general practice of the Committee, the better to promote a flowing exchange of views.

7. The current First Committee agenda is a long, incomprehensible and often incomplete listing of resolutions. The organization of the First Committee's thematic (and action) portions along the lines of the clusters should, in our view, be replicated with regard to the Committee's agenda. A reorganization along the lines of the cluster themes would not inhibit any member from presenting a resolution, whether old or new. It would also be more easily understood by the general public. As such a modification would not represent a fundamental change and is, moreover, consistent with the current emphasis on General Assembly reform and revitalization and improved transparency, we urge that this approach be considered and implemented for the First Committee during the fifty-ninth session. The adoption of a provisional programme of work at the end of each session for the next session will help to plan more effectively.

8. This greater emphasis on policy dialogue should be complemented by less reliance on resolutions as the main measure of the Committee's productivity. The First Committee has traditionally adopted a large number of resolutions, many repetitive in content and voting pattern, with few, if any, substantive textual changes from year to year. In addition, in many cases, there is often little follow-up, impact or implementation. While not wishing to constrain the ability of any State to introduce any resolution on an issue of importance to it, we nevertheless believe that there are a number of steps that can be taken to remedy the deficiencies that are unfortunately too characteristic of current practices, with a view to rendering resolutions more effective and meaningful international policy tools, as well as more reflective of issues and resources.

9. First, the impact of a resolution should be carefully considered on an annual basis. Resolutions should be drafted to be as concise, focused and action-oriented as possible. In our view, greater discipline can and should be exercised. We encourage restraint in re-submitting resolutions, unless new developments so warrant. For example, a resolution establishing an expert group or calling for a study should not

be re-submitted until the report of the group or the study is completed, provided the resolution contains no other substantive elements.

10. For all resolutions, we urge that the customary final paragraph requesting re-inscription of the resolution the following year be deleted. This would by no means eliminate the ability to re-introduce the resolution should a sponsoring State deem the situation to warrant such renewed Committee action.

11. All resolutions should also be seriously considered for biennialization or triennialization. Clustering should be adopted, as decided by the Assembly in paragraph 3 (a) of the annex to its resolution 58/316. The amalgamation of resolutions on similar themes (e.g. United Nations regional peace and disarmament centres) would encourage greater attention to their policy role. Other candidate resolutions for similar such consolidation include those regarding existing nuclear-weapon-free zones and on small arms and light weapons. There may also be opportunities to retire some resolutions, such as those that have become essentially ritualistic. There should be a greater use of decisions, particularly for issues of an administrative nature, which could also be clustered together.

12. Requests to the Secretariat to conduct consultations or prepare a report should be carefully considered, particularly from the perspective of their anticipated value added. Also, when views are sought, Committee members should make an effort to reply substantively and on a timely basis, so as to make this exercise truly useful and reflective of the range of members' views.

13. We welcome the positive step that has already been taken, with the early nomination of the Chairman and election of the Bureau for the fifty-ninth session of the Committee and urge consultation between the outgoing and incoming Bureaux, in order to maintain the Committee's momentum towards improving its effectiveness and meet our obligations under resolution 58/316.

14. We are confident that this reform effort in the First Committee will have a positive impact upon its work; it may also encourage similarly constructive consideration in the other disarmament forums.